EZ STREET

Pattern Picking

BY ANDY ELLIS

Folk and country blues guitarists often use repeated fingerpicking patterns to accompany their vocals. Because "pattern picking" combines rhythm, harmony, and melody in nearly equal proportions, it makes a potent accompaniment technique and lets you simulate a tiny orchestra. In the Dec. '04 EZ Street, we explored the concept of alternating bass strings within a fingerpicked pattern. Let's continue our journey, this time weaving a more elaborate melodic line above the alternating bass.

Ex. 1 illustrates a basic Travis picking pattern (named after the great Merle Travis, who pioneered this approach to fingerpicking). Falling on beats one and three of each measure, the alternating bass strings provide the musical foundation. Pluck these quarter-notes with your thumb. Notice how the index finger relentlessly picks the third string on beats two and four. To complete the puzzle, the middle finger picks a simple melody on the first and second strings. Sometimes this highest note falls on the downbeat (beat one), sometimes it occurs on the upbeat (*and* of beat three). The latter gives Travis picking its syncopated, rolling sound.

Play each measure slowly, repeating it until you feel—and hear—the "squeeze-pick, stag-ger-pick" rhythm emerge from the various individual moves. Once you've nailed this train-like sound, gradually increase the tempo and play through the progression as written. It's important to stay relaxed, so don't pick so fast you tense up and lose the groove.

In each measure, the alternating bass pattern involves different strings and chord tones:

- In bar 1, the bass drops from *D*'s root to its 5 (strings four and five).
- In bar 2, the bass jumps from *Cadd9*'s root to its 3 (strings five and four).
- *G*'s root shifts up to its 3 in bar 3 (strings six and five).
- In bar 4, *G*'s 5 drops to its 3 (strings four and five).

Ex. 2 boasts two rhythms that alternate with each chord change. Look closely, however, and you'll see that the thumb consistently attacks the bass strings on beats one and three, and in each measure the index finger plucks a recurring tone on beats two and four.

It's not hard to create hypnotic, chimey picking patterns that work equally well for electric or acoustic guitar, so give it a whirl. Just keep that bass thumping on every other beat, and you'll be in business.

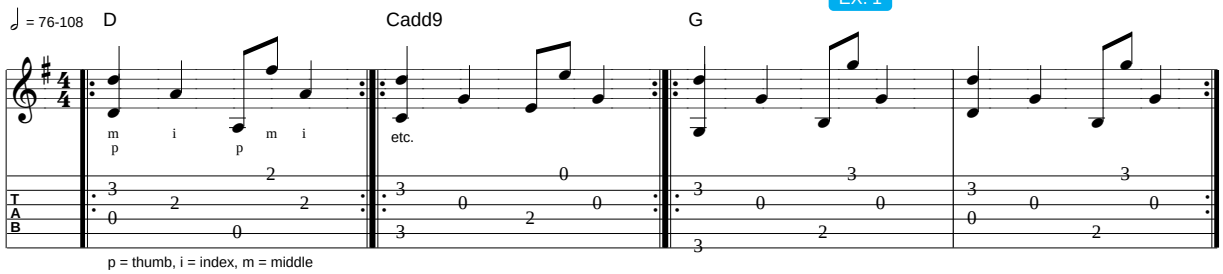
Next time: Flatpicking bass runs.

FYI ADD9 CHORDS

The impressionistic add9 chord is simply a major triad (1, 3, 5) embellished with a note located nine major-scale tones above the root. To create Cadd9, for example, start on C and ascend nine notes (C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D). Add the resulting D to a C triad and you're done. Want a shortcut to the 9? Move a whole-step above the root, and then simply kick that note up an octave. —AE

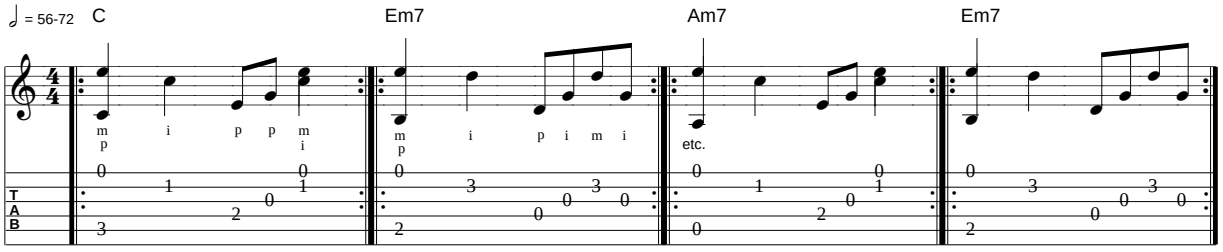
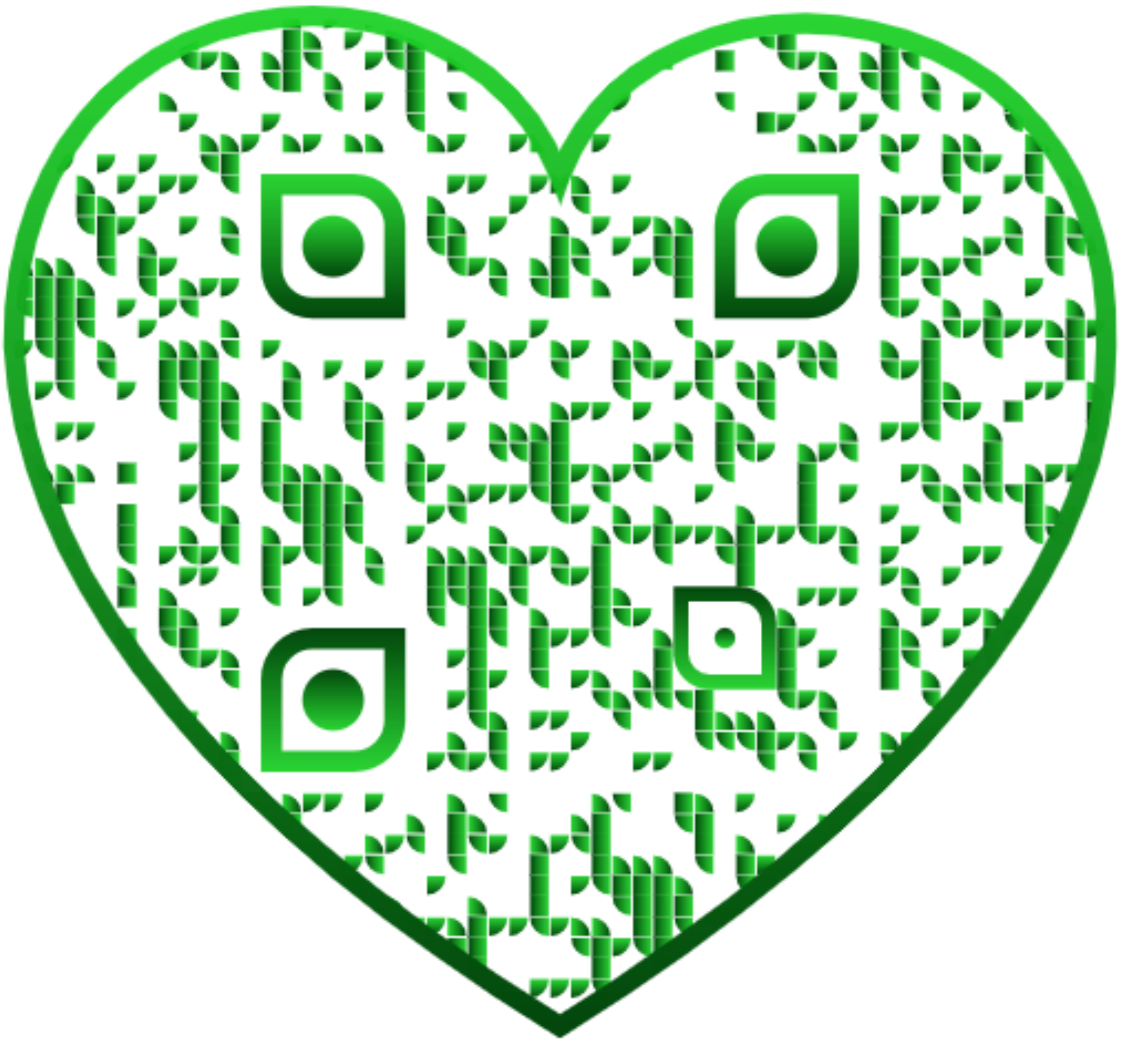
When pattern picking, try gently grazing the bass strings with the underside of your thumb. This will steady your hand and improve picking accuracy [left]. Plucking the bass strings near the fretboard yields a rich, round tone [center]. For snappy, more defined lows, pluck the bass strings close to the saddle using your extended thumb [right].

EX. 1



p = thumb, i = index, m = middle

EX. 2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